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Byline: JOE MILICIA Associated Press

MILLERSBURG, Ohio -- Amish life has always moved at the pace of a horse and buggy.

Yet the old world tempo masks the rapid growth and economic pressures that have forced the Amish to make lifestyle-altering compromises.

More Amish are working off the farm, operating small businesses and coming into contact with an outside world obsessed with speed and convenience. The Amish also are opening up to once-banned forms of technology -- all changes that will influence generations to come.

``The old adage was you had to have a wife and a Bible and 80 acres,'' said Sam Stoltzfus, who lives in Lancaster County, Pa. ``Now you can have two acres and a wife and a Bible and a shop.''

With an average of seven children per family, the Amish population has been doubling about every 20 years since at least the 1940s, said Donald Kraybill, a sociologist at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. In comparison, the U.S. population has doubled since 1948.

The Amish, numbering about 180,000, have settlements in 25 states and Ontario with 70 percent of the population in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana. The largest settlement -- numbering about 29,000 -- is in Holmes, Wayne and Tuscarawas counties in northeast Ohio.

Their faith dictates that they place the community before the individual and keep a distance from the outside world, often avoiding the use of technology -- such as electricity and automobile ownership -- to do so.

Eighty-year-old Emanuel Hershberger has lived through the changing times in Holmes County, a region of rolling hills, dusty roads and bucolic vistas. When he was younger, 90 percent of the Amish there were full-time farmers. Today, about 10 percent are, he said.

Hershberger wears a traditional Amish beard with a clean-shaven upper lip. His gray whiskers reach three buttons down on his shirt. He lives on a 163-acre farm, but his family no longer works the land. Hershberger sold the farm to his son-in-law, and the land is rented out.

``The cost of farming got to a place where they couldn't make a living anymore,'' he said.

Today, many Amish own roofing companies, fabric stores and other businesses or work for non-Amish businesses, such as factories and construction companies. Farm machinery and telephones have become part of Amish life.

``Cultures that are so rigid that they can't adapt don't survive,'' said LaVina Miller Weaver, a mental health therapist from Holmesville who left the Amish faith at 17 to pursue a college education and other opportunities unavailable to Amish women.

``The Amish have had an amazing ability over the years to adapt and let themselves to some extent be shaped and influenced, but not totally,'' she added.

It has become more difficult for the Amish to distance themselves from outsiders, but the interaction has opened up more opportunities to earn a living.

``Frankly, it's just easier to be Amish today economically. You don't have to have a farm,'' said Steven Nolt, associate professor of history at Goshen College in Indiana.

The shift away from farming started in the 1930s and accelerated from the '70s through the 1990s, he said. Factory work is the primary job for men in the Elkhart-LaGrange settlement east of South Bend, Ind., the nearby Nappanee settlement and in Geauga County near Cleveland.

While 75 percent of the Amish in rural Kentucky, Wisconsin and New York still farm, larger settlements in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana have been forced out of agriculture because of land prices, the large startup investment required and the Amish population growth.

``The shift from farm to non-farm employment is the biggest social change in the last century in Amish life,'' Kraybill said.

The loss of farming deprives the Amish of some of their cultural bonds, including the opportunity to work together.

Traditions like group thrashing and hauling firewood are fading into the past. Outside jobs hamper other traditions, like eating every meal together as a family.

``My parents wouldn't have thought about not having three meals a day (together),'' Hershberger said.

In Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, home of the second-largest Amish settlement, the squeeze of development has driven up the price of land. A 100-acre farm would cost more than $1 million just for the land, Kraybill said.

``Without the farm we seem to lose a little bit of identity,'' Stoltzfus said.

Rather than farm, Stoltzfus, 60, has built gazebos and sheds for 21 years. He said it's much easier for Amish people to find work in a shop.

There are about 1,600 Amish-owned and operated businesses in Lancaster County, which allow the Amish to maintain a family structure, Kraybill said.

``These small businesses are negotiated compromises between working on a farm and working in a large factory,'' he said.

But as the Amish have moved away from farming, they've become more consumer-oriented.

Forty years ago an Amish woman in Holmes County created a small scandal by using disposable diapers. Now their use is common. Amish minister David Kline said non-farming occupations generate more wealth and give the Amish more spending power.

``Every year the trash pile gets bigger,'' said Roy Weaver, noting that he and other Amish are now more likely to buy items at Wal-Mart.

The Wal-Mart in Millersburg has a covered garage with hitching posts for Amish buggies, although most Amish hire a driver to take them in a van. The Amish don't own or drive vehicles but are permitted to ride in them.

The U.S. Census doesn't track the population of the Amish. Kraybill estimates population by counting Amish church districts and using Amish directories, which contain lists of families.

With the population doubling every 20 years, in another century the Amish could number more than 5.7 million, which is about half of Ohio's current population.

Kline doubts that the Amish population will continue to grow at that clip.

``My guess is we'll be influenced by larger society and have smaller families,'' he said.

But he believes Amish young people will continue to keep the faith even as the outside world changes around them. About 90 percent of Amish youth remain with the church, the highest percentage since at least the 1930s.

``As the American family disintegrates,'' Kline said, ``... I think more young people will want to stay for the security and the values that are being taught.''

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